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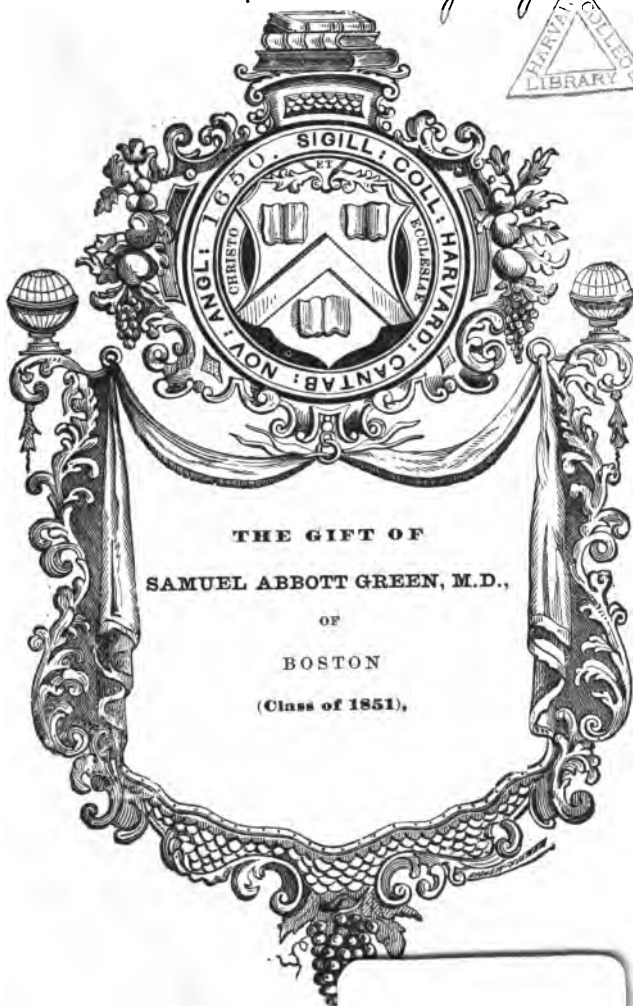
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Bd. July, 1885.



V. N. Savage

BATTLE OF THE NILE:

A PRIZE POEM.

RECITED IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 20, 1844.

BY
JOSEPH L. BRERETON,

UNIVERSITY SCHOLAR.



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M DCCC XLIV.

BATTLE OF THE NILE.

THOU memory-haunted sea, to glory dear,
Whose classic shores their deathless fabrics rear;
Home of the free ! thy conscious waves could tell
Of old Athena's wooden citadel ;
Thy virgin waters nurs'd the infant sail
That venturous Tyre first trusted to the gale ;
And thou hast listen'd to the Afric blast,
Whilst widow'd Carthage mourn'd her empire past ;
And Rome exulting could thine echoes rouse,
To the glad music of her laurell'd prow.

Lift thy proud waters ! rear thy glist'ning crest !
For Albion's warriors ride thy throbbing breast.
Staunch as the oak that ribs their vessel's side,
True as the compass, dauntless as the tide,
Each heart beats worthy of their chieftain's fame,
Each soul is kindled with his soul of flame !

Yet¹ deem not theirs the zeal that pants for strife,
 The thirst for blood—the recklessness of life ;
 No wild ambition with its boundless span,
 The praise of History, but the scourge of man ;
 No restless lust—no avarice led them on,
 No dreams of empires gained, and golden conquests
 won.

By the blue margin of Aboukir's bay,
 The Gallic fleet in safety's slumber lay ;
 Each spiry mast with pencill'd tracery deck'd
 Seemed the mere whim of Fancy's architect—
 So slight, so lofty ! not a sail was spread ;
 The breeze sigh'd gently o'er the watery bed.—
 Ah seeming rest ! fond ignorance of woe !
 The bright waves glitter o'er a tomb below.

Mark yonder vessels crowding into sight.
 'Tis Nelson's squadron, racing to the fight.
 Heard ye that shout ? glad sound to Ocean's ear—
 'Twas Bravery's eloquence—a British cheer !²

¹ Contrast Napoleon's Proclamations to his army before setting out for Egypt.

² When Hood, in the *Zealous*, made signal that the enemy was in sight, a cheer of anticipated triumph burst from every ship in the English fleet.

On, on they press, like falcons in the chace,
Each would be foremost in the glorious race !
Each feels the gush of valour's generous tide,
Glow on each hardy cheek the warrior pride.
One prayer half whisper'd—but no coward's cry,
One thought of home—but no reluctant sigh !
What though the foes their angry welcome fling,
Though wings of flame the iron tempest bring !
Though crash the masts—though burst the sails in
twain,

And the thick grape-shot rends the whiten'd main !—
Undaunted still, Britannia's heroes bide
The deadly storm, and seek the foeman's side.
No useless gun,³ no hurried movement tells,
The spurious valour that Inaction quells :
Till ship with ship, till foe with foeman meets,
And one dark wave upholds the hostile fleets.
Each gun found utterance then ; then burst the force
Of battle's tide—Oh ! who may stem its course ?
Then Terror pray'd for life—what prayer shall speed ?
The death-shriek told its anguish—who shall heed ?
Then flow'd the blood-stream—whose the trickling
life ?

Then rung the war-shout—who hath gained the strife ?

³ None of the British ships returned a gun till they had taken their several stations close alongside of the enemy's vessels.

Unhappy Brueys ! Oh, might valour save,
France had not wept above thine honor'd grave ;
Thy memory had not wreath'd one circlet more
For the rich crown victorious Albion wore !

It might not be. Lo, through the gloom of night,
The ruthless flames wave high their lurid light,
Sport like fell demons through the crackling shrouds,
And mock the fury of yon palsied crowds.
Stay, mortals, stay ! your feeble efforts spare,
A foe more dread, a mightier arm is there ;
In blazing tracery hung from mast to mast,
The wreathed flames their vivid lightnings cast ;
Far o'er the gleaming ocean's crimson'd wave,
Like fabled death-lights pointing to the grave ;
Far o'er the crowds that throng around to gaze,
O'er friends, o'er foemen, streams the mighty blaze ;
Till the vast fabric, leaping from the sea,
Rent with her throes of death-straught agony,
High through the air upheaves her giant frame,
And falls in thousand wrecks—a cataract of flame !⁴

⁴ “This tremendous explosion was followed by a silence not less awful : the firing immediately ceased on both sides ; and the first sound which broke the silence was the dash of her shattered masts and yards falling into the water from the vast height to which they had been exploded.”—*Southey's Life of Nelson*.

The startled Arab heard the distant sound,
And deem'd dread Azrael shook the quaking ground;
Far reach'd the fragments of that deadly shower,
From lone El Rashid⁵ to Aboukir's tower;
Whilst the scar'd echoes on far Canaan's shore
In fainter cadence murmur'd back the roar—
Wide as the view from Pompey's column'd pile,⁶
The towery guardian of the wealthy Nile;
Bright as the flame that erst in prouder days
Stream'd from old Pharos' rock—a warder blaze!

By Mizraim's storied shores the ling'ring sun
Gleams o'er the fight, and hails the avenging gun.
God of the East! he marks her threat'ned woes,
And glares red anger on her daring foes:
Nor hid, pale Crescent, be thine amber light;
Thine are the wrongs, and for thy weal the fight.
In motley groups around Canopus' bay
Thy swarthy votaries watch th' unwonted fray;
And, half in wonder, half in terror, press
To curse the invader, and his foes to bless.
There the fierce Mamluke stays his fiery steed,
Whose God is war, and victory his creed;

⁵ *El Rashid*—ROSETTA.

⁶ Pompey's or Diocletian's pillar. "Elle sert en mer de reconnaissance aux vaisseaux, et guide les Arabes dans les plaines non moins vastes, et nues du desert."—*Histoire d'Egypte. Antiq. Descr.* vol. ii.

O'er the strange sight Arabia's desert child
 The roving Bedouin bends his glances wild :
 Though all unskill'd the Giaour's stern fight to read,
 How fares Britannia, how the Frenchmen speed ;
 Whilst fear and wonder dim their aching gaze,
 The Mamluke trembles, and the Arab prays.

Allah, give ear ! Oh, thou that rul'st the fight,
 Rise, God of battles, and defend the right !
 Here be thy terrors once again display'd,
 Here with dread portents daunt the renegade !⁷

Joy to fair Egypt ! bid new smiles illumine
 Her sadden'd brow, and chase oppression's gloom ;
 Bid cheering hope, with nature's lavish hand,
 Bless the bright scenes of that enchanted land !
 Her green savannahs, soft as evening calm—
 Her lotus-beds, and groves of feathery palm—
 The emerald verdure that in Goshen grows—
 The glist'ning olive, and the perfum'd rose.
 Her lowliest spots with gilded memories spread—
 Tents of the living—cities of the dead ;
 Her ancient monuments, whose legends climb
 Like ivy tendrils round the trunk of Time ;

⁷ *The renegade.* It seems certain that the Egyptians looked on Napoleon's conversion as mere imposture ; and therefore would apply to him all the disgrace of deserting his own religion, without the redeeming virtue of adopting theirs.

The giant Pyramids—Eld's mystic pile—
The desert's trackless graves—the life-streams of the
Nile !

But where the victors ?—where the exulting cry,
The thrilling shout of conscious victory ?
Why are they silent ? Nay, be silent thou !
Hush'd be each whisper—hear the seaman's vow !
“ Kneel, comrades, kneel ! let faithless Gallia mourn ;
“ Learn that God's scorers are themselves a scorn.
“ Be Albion's sons with holier thoughts imbued,
“ Their first glad breath be spent in gratitude !
“ Not unto us be praise or glory given—
“ Not unto us—but to the Lord of Heaven !
“ But that His aid was ours, we now may say,
“ But that His arm upheld us in the fray ;
“ We had not stemm'd them in their surging pride,
“ Our souls had perish'd 'neath the whelming tide.
“ No arm of man, no mortal's boastful sword,
“ Wrought this deliverance —'twas Himself, the
Lord !”

Nelson ! thou richest gem from glory's mine !
A priceless meed—a nation's thanks are thine ;
For thee the grateful chaplet Albion wreath'd,
Thy bright example to her sons bequeath'd :
And still, midst waning years, the hallow'd flame
Of patriot ardour kindles at thy name ;

The youthful sailor reads with beaming eye
Thy noble signal—and is bold to die !
E'en now, weak emblem of a nation's love,
Soars thy tall column, England's thanks to prove ;
There thronging crowds shall gaze with hearts of
pride,
Forget their sorrows, fling their cares aside ;
Ages unborn shall read that deathless scroll,
And spurn the ignoble joys of Pleasure's bowl.
When lawless force and factious storms are rife,
Thy name shall calm the bitterness of strife ;
Then shall thy spirit nobler thoughts inspire,
And Nelson's memory wake the patriot fire !

And ye, brave sailors ! were it mine to raise
A minstrel's tribute of Mæonian praise ;
Had I the art from mortal woof to frame
The deathless texture of immortal fame,
What nobler crown were e'er by minstrel wove,
What boon more precious than your country's love ?
For ye are Albion's chosen, Ocean's pride,
The cherish'd pledges of his island bride !
There were ye nurtur'd, where her warder rock
Stems the rude wave, and bides the tempest's shock ;
Where the hoarse shingle grates beneath the tide,
And screaming storm-birds on the surges ride.

There first th' impatient urchin learnt to steer
His rude-built vessel, and forgot to fear ;
There Nelson learnt to spurn his idler home,
And the wild waters' denizen to roam.
There from the village manse^s the brave boy flew
The tide, the boats, the distant sails to view ;
Whilst home, its friends, its pleasures all forgot,
Wild Nature school'd him for his future lot ;
And taught, amidst the bluff winds' rude embrace,
That ocean-love, no hardships may efface.

Caught with such love the veteran rears his head,
The fearless youngster pants the deck to tread ;
So Britain's sons, the high, the lowly feel
One heartfelt sympathy with seamen's zeal ;
So he, the Poet, though untaught to glow
With that stern rapture warriors only know,
O'er his lone task, yet felt the generous pride,
Whilst fancy bore him to the hero's side,
And patriot ardour nerv'd his soul to write
The glorious story of Aboukir's fight—
Death ! thou canst ne'er set seal to nobler fame,
Whilst sadden'd memory whispers Southey's name ;

^s Nelson's father was rector of the village of Burnham, on the Norfolk coast.

And tells how midst the praises o'er him sped,
Whilst bloodless laurels wreath'd his honour'd head,
'Twas his to seize on Learning's magic store,
From Wisdom's quarry dig the priceless ore,
By worth and virtue win to glory's goal,
And to his country consecrate the whole!

Years have roll'd by, and hoary Time hath cast
His deep'ning shadows o'er the mighty Past;
They whose high actions shook the startled world,
Whose arm wrought vengeance, or destruction hurl'd—
Victors and vanquish'd—dastard hearts that fled—
Brave souls that fought—survivors and the dead—
Like footsteps blotted from the faithless shore,
The grave hath claimed them, and their fights are o'er.—

The world rolls on—yet Time itself shall fail
Ere grateful England wearies of the tale;
For not in vain her gallant heroes bled,⁹
No fruitless laurels twine the victor's head.
Bear witness, Europe! for 'twas thine to feel
How sharp the scourge, how slow the wounds to heal.
Bear witness, Asia! but for Nelson's aid
Thy proudest crowns had graced the renegade.

⁹ For the vast projects Napoleon had in view in his expedition to Egypt, and which were frustrated by the loss of his fleet, consult Bourrienne.

Chiefs had been fain their suppliant gifts to bring,
And Gallia's citizen been Salem's king.
Witness, fair Ind ! if Britain's care can bless
Thine abject sons, in number numberless,
Can bid them pierce Oppression's hopeless gloom,
And Superstition—grovelling to the tomb ;
Can tell of Heaven, of Life beyond the grave,
Can rear the cross, and preach its power to save—
Then lift thy voice, then wreath the grateful smile,
And bless the names of Nelson and the Nile !

THE END.

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Usurp the land, and dispossess the swain.

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Thucyd. lib. iv. 62.

"Udum et molle lutum es, nunc nunc properandus et acri.
Fingendus sine fine rotâ."

Pera. Sat. iii,

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HENRY IV. act i. sc. 3.

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